

# VU Research Portal

## Biting the Bullet or Steering Clear?

Vis, B.

2008

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

Vis, B. (2008). *Biting the Bullet or Steering Clear? Politics of (Not-) Unpopular Welfare State Reform in Advanced Capitalist Democracies*. [PhD-Thesis - Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam]. PrintPartners Ipskamp.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

## Biting the Bullet or Steering Clear?

For over two decades now, welfare state reform has been featuring highly on the political agenda of Western democracies. How much and in which direction has social policy changed as a result? Moreover, why and when do governments pursue different types of reforms, even if they are of the same political colour?

By investigating welfare state change since the late 1970s, this study presents a number of innovations to deal with these key questions in welfare state research. Methodologically, it conducts so-called fuzzy-set analysis to address some persistent problems. The study's results indicate, for example, that – in contrast to theoretical predictions and in spite of substantial reforms – welfare states have not transformed into workfare regimes. Theoretically, this study shows that insights from prospect theory – a behavioural theory of choice under risk – are of great value for understanding why some governments are more willing than others to pursue unpopular social policies, thereby risking losing the next election. Prospect theory posits that a government finding itself in a situation of 'losses' (e.g. declining popularity) is willing to take far greater electoral risks than a government in more favourable circumstances; a hypothesis that this study corroborates empirically. Conversely, governments only pursue not-unpopular reform, such as increasing spending on active labour market programmes, when they are facing gains. This study's new theoretical angle and innovative methodological approach together provide a better understanding of the politics of welfare state reform.

*Barbara Vis is assistant professor at the Department of Political Science, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands.*

Barbara Vis

Politics of (Not-) Unpopular  
Welfare State Reform

## Biting the Bullet or Steering Clear?

Politics of (Not-) Unpopular Welfare State Reform  
in Advanced Capitalist Democracies

Barbara Vis